

Southern Rhône

28 Aug 2008 by Jancis Robinson

In a nutshell: Warm, rich soils.
Main grapes: Grenache, Syrah.

This is the region of France's most sun-friendly wines, and, with Bordeaux, an important source of [quality sparkling](#).

wine, Côte du Rhône is south-east France's warmer, richer, spicier answer to the dry austerity of AC Bordeaux. The wines of the southern Rhône are France's most alcoholic, with 14-15 per cent by no means uncommon for its most famous appellation, Châteaufort-du-Pape (and no chaptalisation, or extra alcohol from added sugar, is allowed this far south).

Perhaps it is the alcohol that makes these southern Rhône reds so easy to appreciate. Perhaps it is the spiky fruity character of the Grenache grape, which dominates here, concentrated by the relatively low yields forced upon it by the stony soils and low rainfall. Perhaps it's because the southern Rhône is the gateway to [Provence](#).

... a land of olive trees, cisterns, sunbaked and impressionist summer landscapes.

The wines made in this seductive countryside are, contrary to best drunk in much cooler climates. They can seem head-thumpingly inappropriate when drunk in the place and season that produces them (although the small proportion of made and dry whites made in the southern Rhône solve the problem - see below).

The southern Rhône is an important hunting ground for the merchants of the [Côte du Rhône](#).

... and a significant proportion of the wines made here are shipped north to be sold with a Tain or Tournon address on the label. Co-operative wineries are also extremely important here.

While Côte du Rhône can come from a vast area of around 62,000 ha (154,000 acres) around the southern end of the French Rhône Valley, Côte du Rhône-Villages comes from a tightly defined area barely a eighth as big on particularly suitable land north and west of Châteaufort-du-Pape. Some Côte du Rhône is vinified using the [Bouquet](#) [Côte du Rhône](#).

technique to yield juicy, fruity wines for whom life is short but an increasing proportion is made to last a few years in bottle and can be great value. Among the hundreds of Côte du Rhône-Villages producers, however, are many with even

greater ambitions for their wines, which are made to develop for five and sometimes more years in bottle. With maximum permitted yields a good sixth lower than those allowed for Côte du Rhône, Côte du Rhône-Villages is one of France's best-value appellations, perhaps because promotion prospects are so obvious.

Since the appellation was formed in 1966, five of the nearly 20 villages have been granted their own appellations - Beaumes-de-Venise, Gigondas, Redonne, and Vacqueyras and Vinsobres - and the other village names encountered on labels and also marked on the map produce some seriously fine, often underappreciated wines.

Châteaufort-du-Pape is the region's most famous and best wine, and all other made and whites made here apparently use it as their model. Châteaufort is most famous in wine books as the appellation in which 13 different grape varieties are permitted. In practice, however, the reds are made predominantly from Grenache, supplemented by Syrah, Mourvèdre and, to a decreasing extent, Cinsaut, while the relatively rare whites are made from a more variable hedge including Grenache Blanc, Clairette, Bourboulenc and Roussanne.

Red Châteaufort is a big, beefy wine with lots of alcohol and extract, with a come-hither, if slightly bludgeoning, approach to the wine drinker. (And this one of France's most reliable appellations, and have had remarkably few disappointments among wines bottled in the signature-embossed, heavy bottle, (in fact if there is a regional fault it is that in some very hot years the wines can be just too alcoholic, and in particularly dry years they can be too tannic.) The fact that so much Châteaufort meets a certain minimum standard probably reflects the fact that yields have to be kept remarkably low as well as the mandatory selection of only healthy, ripe grapes.

There is considerable variation in how the wines are made, but bi-tech methods are rare here among the prices. The ecological Châteaufort vineyard has low bush vines straggling up sunlight between large boulders, whose effect is to continue the warming process well into the night, but in fact many of the best vineyards are on much more conventional ground.

While Châteaufort always has fewer rules, some of them are still very fiddly and unappealing, while an increasing proportion have enough fruit and acidity (with, always, lots of alcohol) to make truly interesting bottles. Roussanne can be a particularly interesting ingredient. See [Châteaufort doesn't have to be so](#).

Châteaufort has a multitude of good to very good producers, but Beaumont, Domaine de la Jasse, Domaine de Pégivé, Rayon, Vieux Télégraphe and Clos des Pipas are almost always excellent (and Rayon second label Pignan and even its Côte du Rhône label Ch. de Fonsalette are well above average).

Gigondas is another relatively reliable wine made, as a red and full bodied, in the image of Châteaufort from higher, rockier ground. It comes less and usually tastes rather more rustic, a characteristic which has its own charm. Reliable names include Château La Boussanière, de St-Côme, Les Pallières and Domaine Les Goulers. Vacqueyras, the other appellation Côte-du-Rhône-Villages, is not usually quite so dense, but can be very good value.

With the exception of Châteaufort, whose regulations are stricter than almost any others in France, wherever red wine is made in southern France, red is, too, most of it being drunk locally during the hot summer months. The Grenache and Cinsaut of the southern Rhône, with their relatively thin skins and open, fruity flavour are particularly suitable for making pink wine. The southern Rhône's most famous rose by far is Tavel, made on the right bank of the Rhône and a serious, historic wine in its own right. Just as Châteaufort is France's most positive red, Tavel across the river is its most powerful pink.

This is a wine not for guzzling in the garden but as a substantial red wine substitute in hot weather. Chabig is essential. Ch. d'Arpente is one of the best known roses.

Just north of Tavel, Lapeyrol produces considerable quantities of rose very similar to Tavel and full-bodied red wine, as well as some full-bodied dry whites. Domaine de la Mandrola is one of the best producers.

The southern Rhône also produces some recent, relatively alcohol-free [rosé blanc](#).

... most famously Muscat de Beaumes-de-Venise. This golden, grapey rosé of the juice of the best Muscat with alcohol is made in the village of Beaumes-de-Venise, now recognised as a separate appellation. The village of Rasteau has its own special appellation for red and oak-aged berry vin doux naturel, which has a much less competition taste than Muscat de Beaumes-de-Venise. (Regular red Rasteau is interesting for the amount of Mourvèdre grown there.)

Many producers make not just, say, a Châteaufort but also Côte du Rhône and possibly another wine from one of the named wine villages around Châteaufort du Pape so for this reason we have not divided this list of favourite producers by appellation.

Some favourite producers: Barroche, Bastide St Dominique, Beaumont, Châteaufort, Chateau-Arnaud, Clos des Papes, Clos du Caillou, Clos St-Jean, Coude du Valon, Fauriol, Fonsalette, Gales des Papes, Gigondas, Giraud, Gout de Mouton, Grompon, Jasse, Marou, Montluc, Mondron, Papes, Rayon, Roger Perrin, St-Côme, St-Paul, St-Pierre, Soubise, Tardieu-Laurent, Raymond Uniegh, Yvelin, Yvelin, Yvelin, Vieux Télégraphe.

Almost a bridge between the Rhône and Provence is Côte du Ventoux, whose vineyards lie on the slopes of Mont Ventoux, one of the few peaks ever to be covered in snow for the winter in the region. The Grenache-based reds and rosés are considerably lighter than most Côte du Rhône but can be all the more refreshing for it. La Vieille Ferme is a very successful brand built on the appellation by the Perrin family of Ch. de Beaucastel. Priguat and Fondèche are two of the star producers here.

Coteaux du Tricastin tastes like a halfway house between Côte du Rhône and Côte du Ventoux even though it is in fact effectively a northern enclave with the Côte du Rhône-Villages. Grangevine is the leading producer. Across the Rhône is the rather similar appellation Côte du Vivarais, where Domaine du Belveret has outperformed its neighbours.

Castillon de Médoc is sometimes thrown into the Languedoc but it's really part of the southern Rhône, and its wines tend to taste like a blend between those of the eastern Languedoc and those of the Côte du Rhône, so one would expect from looking at a map. I have enjoyed wines from de Beck, Grand Cassagne, Més Nèuf, Mourgaud, du Orlès and Ch de Nèges.

And finally, the greater Rhône Valley has its curious eastern outpost, around Die on the river Drôme. Hermit and his elephants are invoked in the names of the local wines, of which the most famous now are sparkling either dry Coteaux de Die made in the image of champagne, or the greater, fuller Cuvée de Die. The co-operative is in charge here.